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Dianne Wampler 12/13/2006 05:18:54 PM From DB/Inbox: Dianne Wampler

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 002154

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SUBJECT: AMERICAN COUNCIL OF YOUNG POLITICAL LEADERS ENGAGES WITH
TURKISH OPINION LEADERS IN ISTANBUL

11. Begin Summary: A visiting American Council of Young Political Leaders (AYCPL) delegation engaged over dinner December 4 at the Consul General's Residence with a group of Turkish political party leaders, academics, business executives, and senior press columnists and editors. The lively exchange of opinions regarding a wide range of issues effecting U.S.-Turkey relations offered the U.S. delegation a good idea of the marked differences in views and approaches between Istanbul's secular elite and the Islam oriented, religiously conservative segment of the population. It also afforded the "Istanbullu" participants a rare opportunity for direct exchange amongst themselves. End Summary.

12. On December 4, the Consul General hosted a delegation of American Council of Young Political Leaders (ACYPL) whose 12-day visit to Istanbul, Ankara and Kayseri was co-sponsored by the State Department and the Turkish private sector and organized by the ARI Movement, a Turkish political and social NGO that encourages young people to take on leadership positions in politics. The six members of the ACYPL delegation were: Joey Fillingane, Mississippi State Senate (R); Ana E. Hernandez, Texas House of Representatives (D); Victor R. Ramirez, Maryland House of Delegates (D); Cy Thao, Minnesota House of Representatives (D); George Selim, Policy Advisor, Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security (R); and Albert James Lama (Escort), Chief Hearing Officer, New Mexico Tax and Revenue Department (D). The Turkish guests, the majority of whom were International Visitor Leadership Program alumni, were Public Affairs Section contacts from academia, political parties, business and media. The guests discussed a broad spectrum of subjects including Iraq, Iran, Cyprus, the Pope's recent visit to Turkey as well as Turkish domestic policies.

Turkish-American Relations: Public Perceptions

13. In response to a comment that some expatriates in Turkey believed Turks were less friendly to Americans in recent years due

to the war in Iraq, Homeland Security's Selim commented that it was his understanding that Arabic/Muslim populations continue to like the American people but strongly object to American policies, particularly in Iraq and the Middle East. Turkish guests agreed this was the case in Turkey. An academic pointed to a recent poll indicating that Turks believed the number one threat to Turkey was the U.S., followed by an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq and the PKK terrorist organization.

Iran

¶4. Rather surprisingly, an academic from Istanbul University remarked that it was the duty of the U.S. to support Israel and that this should be a factor in deciding how to react to Iran's nuclear program. In the end, however, he argued it would be up to Iranian President Ahmadinejad to determine U.S. reaction, since he would decide how far to push his country's nuclear program.

Visas

¶5. Taking advantage of the presence of an official from Homeland Security, several guests criticized the length of time it takes to issue U.S. non-immigrant visas, particularly when "additional screening" is required. A number of prominent academics have missed conferences at which they were scheduled to deliver papers due to the long screening process, even though in several cases they had applied six weeks in advance. Students have been forced to defer the beginning of their studies by a semester. ConGen Offs underscored the importance of this issue, and Selim admitted that such delays occur, but noted that the only remedy was to start the visa application process as early as possible.

Cyprus, EU

¶6. The problem of Cyprus and its impact on broader EU accession talks animated a number of conversations. One television news producer accidentally sent a wine glass flying as he explained to delegation members the impossibility of expecting Turkey to compromise further than it already had on this issue (This preceded the GOT's reported offer to open one seaport and one airport in an effort to break the diplomatic logjam). An ARI movement member (who described himself as a nationalist) strongly agreed, remarking that there were two nations on the island and asking them to join as one state and one nation was unreasonable. A Turkish think-tank representative proffered his analysis of the suspension of Turkey's EU accession talks on eight to ten subject headings. Whereas the AKP government had signed an additional, written protocol committing to the opening of ports, the Europeans in return had simply given a verbal commitment regarding the facilitation of Turkey's EU accession. This resulted, he believed, in the Turkish foreign ministry being backed into a corner, and put in a position where Turkey was expected to honor the signed protocol, with no substantial guarantees in return.

Turkish Domestic Politics

¶7. Turkish guests also engaged in an animated discussion on the likelihood of PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan's announcing his candidacy for the May 2007 presidential elections. The vast majority believed he would do so, noting there were no promising alternate candidates. While they expected initial public outrage among the secular elite, they believed that the population would ultimately accept Erdogan as President. A think-tank representative indicated that Turks could tolerate a devout male Muslim leader, but that they were less tolerant of devout Muslim women (referring to Erdogan's wife, who wears a headscarf). He argued that Mrs. Erdogan's appearance presents a concern for the general public and that opposition to Erdogan's candidacy (or subsequent presidency) could be linked to the public's perception of his wife. When the think tank representative pointedly asked the Justice and Development (AK) party mayor of one of Istanbul's largest local municipalities

(Beyoglu) for an answer regarding Erdogan's intentions, the mayor, whose father is a close associate of the Prime Minister's, demurred, saying he had no knowledge on the subject.

¶18. When the discussion turned to secularism in the Turkish army, one ARI representative claimed that the military was in fact a religious entity since all mess hall meals are preceded by mandatory prayer. He was contradicted by an academic, who claimed that the word "Allah" was not used in such prayers. Instead, the generic Turkish word for God, "tanrı" was used, which he believed made the prayer less religious. There was also a heated discussion on whether the law banning headscarves from public buildings and universities should be rescinded. The ARI participant complained that it was ironic that the State, which allows headscarves at religious vocational "Imam Hatip" high schools, would not let the same students dress the same way when they enter university. He advocated extending the headscarf ban to include all high schools. Homeland Security's Selim remarked that wearing religious garments is not a concern in the U.S. unless it interferes with others' rights. The ARI representative contrasted eastern provinces such as Erzurum where students not wearing scarves were treated with hostility with western provinces where scarf-wearing students were often humiliated.

¶19. The same self-styled ARI "nationalist" mentioned above drew astonished reactions from his fellow countrymen at one table when he suggested that there should be a separate Kurdish state in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. "I am a nationalist," he countered, "and I also support Kurdish nationalism."

Pope's Visit

¶10. All the Turkish guests agreed that the Pope's visit was received very positively in Turkey and that the Pontiff had succeeded in bringing the Christian and Muslim worlds closer together. Many noted that the Pope appeared to have "become a diplomat overnight" by making gestures such as waving the Turkish flag, using a few Turkish words, and especially by praying in Istanbul's famed Sultanahmed (Blue) Mosque. His encouraging words regarding Turkey's EU accession were also very positively received. As one academic stated, "The visit could not have gone better." Another Turkish guest wryly concurred with local observations that "We Turks are funny people; two weeks ago we hated the Pope. Now we love him."

Kayseri - Anatolian Tiger

¶11. Upon hearing that the ACYPL delegation would be spending four days in Kayseri, a deeply religious and socially conservative city of 500,000 in central Anatolia, the vice-chairman of MUSIAD, the Islam-oriented business organization, noted that Kayseri has become such an economic success story that it has earned the title "Anatolian Tiger." One of the ARI guests noted that his organization had recently completed a report entitled "Calvinist Islam," about the phenomenon of economically successful religiously conservative areas of Turkey. He said that the title, which referred to a strong work ethic mixed with Muslim values, was heavily criticized by the devout, who believed it could be understood as an effort to Christianize Islam. The MUSIAD representative agreed that the report was very controversial, saying the title had made his life difficult for months as many Western media outlets sought out his reaction. The ARI representative attributed Kayseri's current success in part to the historical legacy of the city's economically successful Armenian and Greek populations, although he noted that this underlying factor was not included in the original report due to potential political sensitivities.

¶12. Comment. This gathering at the Consul General's residence provided an opportunity not only for the young political leaders from the U.S. to meet their Istanbul-based counterparts, but for the latter group to meet and engage one another as well in an unusually neutral, relaxed atmosphere. The wide-ranging nature of the conversation, and the emotion that some subjects (Cyprus,

headscarves, secularism) engendered set the stage for the remainder of the group's visit to Turkey. End Comment.

JONES